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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [CASC](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: NEW LIFE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH STATUS - UPDATE

REF: HCMC 1024 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) New Life Fellowship church (NLF) pastor-in-charge Eric Dooley and responsible local and central-level officials have held a series of meetings on the impasse over the operations of the church (ref A). Dooley told us that, in mid-October, at the recommendation of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), he met with Nguyen Van Thong, the Central-level CRA official responsible for Protestant affairs. Reportedly, Thong asked the NLF to abandon discussions with the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). Instead, following the NLF's submission of a series of documents, the NLF would be "investigated as a possible risk to national security and national stability." If the CRA was satisfied after its review, the GVN would make a decision on legalization of the NLF. Thong reportedly told Dooley, that, while the GVN was considering his case, the NLF could continue its present level of operations. (Per reftels, following its "ban" at HCMC's Windsor Plaza Hotel, the NLF is conducting services for expatriates in 20 private homes in HCMC.) Thong emphasized that the NLF's services should be for expatriates only.

2. (SBU) On November 16, Dooley informed us that he is scheduling a follow up meeting with Thong for later in November. He has engaged a local HCMC lawyer to accompany him to the meeting.

3. (SBU) On November 3, PolOffs raised the impasse over the NLF with Tran Ngoc Bao, Vice Chairman in charge of Protestant and Catholic Issues of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs. Bao had last met with Dooley in late October. Bao said he encouraged Dooley to reconsider his refusal to partner with a local Vietnamese church, but Dooley stuck to his position that the NLF did not want to be dependant on other organizations and would continue to demand the right to conduct services in a five-star hotel. Bao said that he emphasized that "Vietnamese custom and law" dictated that regular worship services should be conducted in a designated place of worship. He asked why the Japanese, Korean, and French Protestants and Catholic expatriates could share church facilities with local partners "without any problems," but the NLF could not.

4. (SBU) We asked Bao about the apparent disconnect between the HCMC CRA's advice to the NLF to partner with the SECV and the Central-level CRA's admonition to Dooley not to deal with the group. Bao explained that the approach depended on what legal status the NLF and Dooley sought in Vietnam. The HCMC CRA had the authority to approve a church-sharing arrangement between the NLF and the SECV (in effect the SECV would become the parent church of the NLF). If Dooley and the NLF wish to operate as an independent, registered foreign church in Vietnam, the church -- and Dooley -- must apply for legal status with the GVN under separate legal provisions governing foreign religious groups. According to Bao, even now, the NLF can use of a hotel for "social" gatherings, but religious services, Sunday school and baptisms would have to be conducted in a church. The NLF's rental of a room or hall in a hotel is a pure business transaction between the NLF and the hotel management, Bao asserted. The CRA does not have any role in administering or monitoring such a business transaction, Bao added. (Even if granted independent legal status, it is unclear whether the NLF would have the right to hold religious services anywhere other than a designated church.)

5. (SBU) Comment: The NLF's discussions with HCMC and central-level authorities is a positive development, although the two sides still are far apart on substance. It may signal that church's leadership is beginning to realize that dialogue is preferable to the more confrontational posture it first adopted. And, whatever CRA officials may think of Dooley, they seem to understand that the NLF's expatriate membership, which includes representatives from major multinationals based in HCMC, is an important constituency and that an outright ban of the NLF could be a costly decision.

WINNICK